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ABSTRACT

Midlife transition is a potentially problematic time for all women, but especially for those who are unmarried, relatively less well-educated, and who do not reside in urban areas. Some studies suggest that unmarried women have more difficulty in identity formation and acceptance of their role by society. Married women whose children are nearly grown tend to experience more satisfaction and less stress at midlife. Due to a cultural lag in attitudes and fewer opportunities for self-fulfillment and attainment of new or different roles, women in a non-urban setting may have more problems with midlife transition. A strong educational background enlarges a woman's perceived world, thus facilitating her ability to play various roles. (Author/JAC)

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Women's Midlife Transition Experience as a Function of Marital Status, Education, and Urban-Rural Residence

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Introduction

Since the publication of the best-selling Passages (Sheehy, 1976), followed by Transformations (Gould, 1978), and The Seasons of a Man's Life (Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson & McKee, 1978), the phrase "midlife transition" has increasingly become part of our vocabulary.

Much of the research on the midlife transition concerns married, middle-class, white, relatively well-educated, urban dwellers who are mostly male. Stage-theory formulations of adult development have, in large measure, been based on the results of these studies. As such, there has been little or no recognition of differences in social status (Pearlin, 1980; Fiske, 1980), gender (Barnett & Baruch, 1978; Notman, 1979), and our increasingly "age-irrelevant" society (Neugarten, 1979).

What little research there has been on the midlife transition in women has virtually ignored those who are unmarried, who are relatively less well-educated, and who reside in other than urban areas.

This paper, therefore, will attempt to examine different perspectives on the midlife transition in terms of how they may apply to women as a function of marital status, educational level, and place of residence.

There are two major hindrances to such an undertaking: relevant literature is scarce and fragmented, and the author has never lived in a rural area or experienced rural life. Thus what follows may be disjointed and biased. It is nevertheless a start.

Perspectives on the Midlife Transition

The midlife transition can be viewed from three perspectives: as one of a number of developmental stages in the life cycle, as a series of "scheduled" and "nonscheduled" events which necessitate adaptation (Pearlin, 1980), or as potential changes in roles (Barnett & Baruch, 1978; Fransella & Frost, 1977; Frieze et al, 1979). Since no one perspective encompasses all aspects of experience, the three will be outlined briefly and then synthesized in terms of the midlife transition.

Stages. Erikson (1950) was the first major theorist to conceptualize development as a process that spans the entire life cycle. He thought of development in eight stages, three of which cover the approximately half-century of life after adolescence, and correspond to young, middle, and late adulthood.

One aspect of Erikson's theory is relevant to this discussion. He claims that the task of identity formation is supposed to be resolved in the late adolescent and early adult years. Yet for women issues of personal identity often do not become salient until childrearing responsibilities are almost over. Erikson claims, however, that women's identity issues are resolved when they get married. The implication is that if they do not marry, they will never establish an identity. This, however, is apparently not true for men.

Recently Levinson et al (1978) subdivided and expanded

upon Erikson's formulation. In their scheme, the midlife transition, which spans approximately 40 to 45 years of age, marks the end of early adulthood and the beginning of middle adulthood.

They arrived at this sequence based on a study of 40 men between the ages of 35 and 45, who were divided equally among four occupations which represent dissimilar sectors of society: hourly workers in industry, business executives, university biologists, and novelists. All resided in the northeastern United States. There was some variability in socioeconomic background and ethnicity, but mostly the subjects were white and middle-class. The main method of the study was in-depth biographical interviewing of 10 to 20 hours duration over a two- to three-month time span. Levinson and his colleages concluded that, although "biological, psychological, and social conditions" may somewhat alter the timing of stages, there is nevertheless "low variability in the age at which each period begins and ends."

Levinson (1980) posits three major tasks of the midlife transition: First, since there is a growing awareness of mortality, it is desirable to reevaluate and determine how best to live the remainder of one's life. Second, there is a need to synthesize "the great polarities: young/old (the most important one), destruction/creation, masculine/feminine, and attachment/separateness." Third, one is supposed to modify the "life structure," the basis upon which one's life has been built.

Adaptation. The adaptation perspective has been used to examine major life events, such as: leaving home, obtaining a first job, getting married, becoming a parent or a grandparent, reaching menopause, retiring from active employment. Some of these major life events may occur during the midlife transition and may be precipitated by the tasks previously mentioned. However they come about, such events frequently result in emotional distress. How one adapts is determined by the event itself, the context in which it occurs, the personal resources one has, and whether one can obtain support from others (Pearlin, 1980). The latter three variables are affected by class differences. There are also differences for male or female, married or unmarried.

Pearlin discussed three classes of events that may lead to stress: (1) everyday problems which are slow to change; (2) predictable or "scheduled" events; (3) unexpected or "unscheduled" events. Pearlin posits three possible causes of the stress; undesirability, loss, and disequilibrium. Again, however, social class makes a difference. For example, for mothers, the departure of the last child, though predictable, is more stressful for lower class women. Middle class women, on the other hand, are more likely to experience a sense of freedom because they have more options than women of lower social class (Mogul, 1979).

Roles. Frieze et al (1979) define role as "the set of expectations that arise from positions in society that one

holds...some positions are based on personal attributes that are endowed by society with special relevance--such as gender and age." Roles are learned through socialization which Staub (1980) characterizes as "the process whereby the rules, standards of conduct, expectations, and knowledge of the adult culture are transmitted to children through the period of their maturation and development..."

Women's main roles now, as in the past, are those of wife, homemaker, mother, and worker (usually unpaid or underpaid). However, with rapid social changes on many fronts, particularly the advent of effective birth control, and the revival of the women's liberation movement within the last two decades, the emphasis placed on each of these roles has changed.

In terms of the role of wife, for example, women are postponing marriage and are divorcing in greater numbers than ever before. The role of housewife has been affected by such factors as labor-saving devices, which allow women more time for other pursuits and, in turn, may result in a greater need for outside stimulation. The role of mother is changing in that women are putting off having children or having fewer children. In short, the roles of wife, homemaker, and mother are becoming less central in women's lives.

For these women the role of worker, meanwhile, has become more significant, mainly for reasons of financial need and, to a lesser degree, the desire for self-fulfillment. It should be noted that in the lives of unmarried women, almost all of whom

are self-supporting, the role of worker has, of necessity, always been of foremost importance.

While there is no fixed age at which one's roles change, a number of role changes may occur during the midlife transition as a result of reevaluating one's life.

Utilizing the three perspectives, midlife transition may be viewed in terms of a combination of age, tasks, life events, and roles, each of which involve varying degrees of "biological, psychological, and social components" (Levinson et al, 1978).

Women's Experiences

Effects of Marital Status, Motherhood, and Education.

The manner in which a woman experiences the midlife transition depends on whether she has married, had children, and her level of education. As mothers enter midlife, for example, their children may be on the threshold of adulthood, and on the verge of leaving home to establish lives of their own. This represents loss of the maternal role. If a woman has devoted much of her adult life to nurturing and caring for her children, she may find that the "empty nest" leaves her feeling empty inside as well as outside. This may be further accentuated by the impending menopause. Other women, however, may look forward to this time with hope and optimism in that they will now be much more independent and free to pursue their own interests.

Sheehy (1976) states that approximately 10 percent of women never marry (U. S. Dept. of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1973). Among never-married women are those who subscribe to the traditional feminine ideals of marriage and motherhood and have every intention of getting married, but for some reason it doesn't happen. However, they keep their options open and may not make a commitment to a career, even though they may be qualified to do so by virtue of education and personal qualities. Still others reject the traditional female role and attempt to achieve some measure of success in the workplace. However, the realities of discrimination which have been experienced by the cohort of women who are now in midlife have overwhelmingly precluded this possibility. With the gains made through the women's liberation movement this will no doubt change in the future, though the process will continue to be a slow and sometimes painful one.

Whatever the case, whether women have remained unmarried through choice or default, they may become depressed as they enter midlife (Mogul, 1979). One reason, among others, is that our society has been reluctant to acknowledge this as an acceptable lifestyle, especially for women.

For women who have not experienced pregnancy and birth, who have not been mothers, this period represents the transition from youth to middle age, and portends the end of the reproductive years. Though many such women have accepted

their childlessness before the biological menopause, others may decide to reconsider and possibly alter previous decisions not to marry or not to have children (Mogul, 1979; Notman, 1979).

Whether a woman is married or unmarried may have a bearing on such factors as self-esteem and life satisfaction. For example, Birnbaum (1975) studied the self-esteem of educated women, ages 36 to 46, by role choice: homemaker, married professional, and single professional. More than half (54 percent) of professional women, whether married or unmarried, achieved self-esteem ratings of "good" to "very good," whereas only 14 percent of homemakers had similar scores. Since the benefits of work for less-educated women were not explored, it is not known whether work is also growth-enhancing for them. However, Birnbaum concluded that women who do not try to take on new roles during this time may encounter increasing problems later on in their lives.

Campbell (1975) surveyed married and unmarried men and women regarding the satisfaction and stresses of various adult roles and stages, in terms of age, marital status, and ages of children. For women, two categories are applicable to this paper: "Married, Children Over 17" and "Over 30, Never Married." On "General Life Satisfaction," the married women scored in the upper half; the unmarried women scored in the lower half. On "Feelings of Stress," both groups were in the lower half, with unmarried women reporting some-

what more stress. In other words, during the midlife transition it is likely that, all other things being equal, married women whose children are almost grown experience more satisfaction and less stress than women who have never married. As far as can be determined, the effects of education and work were not investigated.

Rural Considerations

Due to cultural lag in attitudes, and fewer opportunities for self-fulfillment, women living in rural areas may experience the midlife transition differently. In terms of attitudes, Fischer (1978) analyzed trends in attitudes over a period of 20 years and concluded that innovative ideas are accepted first in the largest urban areas, and gradually diffuse to rural areas, in order of size of community. Fischer discusses this diffusion relative to three size categories: large urban (500,000 or more); small urban (2,500 to 499,999); and non-urban. While this diffusion is occurring, still newer innovations are emerging and the process begins again. But there is always a gap, wherein rural areas lag behind urban areas in the acceptance of new ideas. Degree of acceptance of new ideas would appear to be related to degree of openness to the possibility of role change during midlife transition. Thus differences may be found in rural and urban women on this dimension.

One aspect of the midlife transition that is salient, especially for women, is a need to fulfill aspects of oneself

that had to be "put on the shelf," a need to use previously latent talents and capacities (Neugarten, 1968). This often involves seeking new or additional roles. Opportunities for doing so, however, are more available in urban settings. As Miller and Crader (1979) put it:

> The urban setting...has opportunity structures--such as economic, (educational), and cultural...--that are non-existent or at least less viable in the rural area. This suggests that there are certain domains of life or areas of experience that are most fully rewarded in urban areas.

Taheri and Willits (1975) believe that being well-educated is conducive to role differentiation because it enlarges a person's perceived world, thus facilitating the ability to play various roles and "to participate in more differentiated social worlds." This would seem to favor the urban educated woman the most, and the rural uneducated woman least, and, in general, would favor urban more than rural women.

In the domain of employment, Maret and Chenoweth (1979) compared "the labor force patterns" of rural women aged 30 to 44 who lived inside and outside a Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area (SMSA). Overall, rural women outside SMSAs had significantly less labor market experience because of fewer and less flexible opportunities for employment. However, if these women had a college degree and/or a supportive husband, they were more likely to be employed. Attitudes towards women's roles were important in determining labor

force participation for both groups.

LaGodna (1980) examined the lives of rural women in terms of marital status. She asserts that the rural woman is perceived mainly in terms of the family, especially her husband. Thus the role of the single woman is particularly problematic. She may be isolated from community social life, and hence be at higher risk to develop problems such as depression, alcohol and/or drug addiction, and psychosomatic disorders.

Suggestions for Future Research

To date, there has been little or no research on the midlife transition as experienced by women whose lifestyles differ from the traditional urban middle-class nuclear family, and who, therefore, are not readily accessible or neatly pigeonholed. But as changes in women's roles continue, there will be increasing numbers of such women, whom we can no longer afford to ignore or forget just because they are not visible.

The midlife transition marks a critical turning point that may significantly affect the rest of one's life for better or worse. Women outside the mainstream, whose contributions have been little valued, and who are isolated from needed resources that would enable them to take advantage of opportunities available at this time, are likely to experience this period negatively enough that the quality of the rest of their lives will be significantly diminished. This is especially true of single women and rural women.

From the foregoing, it would be fruitful to conduct

systematic in-depth investigations of women's midlife experience as a function of marital status, educational level, and place of residence. Possible areas of exploration might include, among others: (1) how they adapt to everyday events, as well as to "scheduled" and "unscheduled" events (Pearlin, 1980); (2) how they label or construe such events (Fransella & Frost, 1977); (3) the degree to which the effective use of personal and interpersonal resources facilitates successful midlife transition (Robertson, 1978). The findings of such research would have implications for action in the political, corporate, medical, educational, and mental health spheres, and, most importantly, by women themselves--in terms of helping to create more flexible job opportunities, upgrading jobs and establishing career ladders, forming social networks and support systems, providing opportunities for continuing education and training.

In particular, the current cohort of women at the beginning of the midlife transition needs attention. They grew up in the 1940's and came of age in the 1950's when the traditional feminine role as the sine qua non was at its height. To the extent that they did not follow this path to "living happily ever after," they were, and in many ways still are, looked upon as deviant, and have, unfortunately, too often come to see themselves that way as well. On the other hand, if they patterned their lives according to the ideals of marriage and motherhood, they may be ill-prepared for the

world that has ensued since the changes of the 1960's and 1970's.

Not long ago, more than half the population was under 30 years of age. Recently the trend has been going the other way, due mainly to declining birth rates and increased longevity, which, from all indications, will continue. Thus it is more important than ever before to address the unique needs of these older age groups, such as women who are beginning the midlife transition. Instituting relevant policies and programs to assist these women now will have significant preventive and ameliorative effects for their later years.

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